

Remarks of John Rasmussen at the Owen Chamberlain memorial at The Faculty Club

It is an honor to be asked to say a few words on the life of a great scientist and humanitarian, Owen Chamberlain. His primary focus and energies were devoted to physics research and teaching, but he also contributed much to efforts for peace in the world and especially to minimize possibilities of any future use of nuclear weapons in war.

As a young grad student at Los Alamos with the Manhattan Project Owen worked with the fledgling FAS (then Federation of Atomic Scientists, later Federation of American Scientists) in the successful effort to put post-World-War-II control of nuclear energy under a civilian agency (the A.E.C.) instead of leaving it in the hands of the military.

There is not time for me to recount the many ways that Owen contributed to these and other humanitarian causes. I will only note three situations where I was more closely involved, from 50, 40, and 25 years ago.

1. The first situation occurred about 50 years ago. Many in the scientific community were shocked when the government stripped Robert Oppenheimer of his security clearance and position in the government. This was a time of recurrent “Red Scares,” only a few years after Berkeley lost several brilliant faculty and others in the 1949 Loyalty Oath controversy and when McCarthyism was rampant. Accusations of Leftist sympathies or the simple criticism of government policies could and did destroy careers. In response to the actions against Oppenheimer several of us from nuclear science and engineering joined to form what we called the Bay Area Scientists Discussion Group, meeting in homes or elsewhere off-campus. We discussed and studied such topics as government loyalty and security policies, freedom-of- speech matters, and passport and visa problems of scientists, such as, the revocation of Linus Pauling’s passport. (Pauling had been aggressively campaigning against atmospheric nuclear weapons testing.) We were further shocked when the transcripts of the secret hearings on Oppenheimer were leaked and published, revealing that several leading scientists in the Bay Area either testified for, or failed to oppose, the drastic punishment of Oppenheimer. The membership in our Discussion Group abruptly dropped, as fears arose that continued participation might lead to a loss of jobs. Owen, not yet a Nobel Laureate, fearlessly remained active with our “discussion group,” which we soon converted to the Berkeley chapter of the Federation of American Scientists. Owen held national office in FAS shortly after that, and a decade later two of us from the Berkeley Chapter served a year each as elected National Chairmen.
2. The second situation came 40 years ago. The Viet Nam war was escalating sharply, with aerial bombing of North Viet Nam initiated and expanding. Petitions and letters of dissent were being ignored in Washington. Finally, some campus activists organized a protest march from Sproul Plaza down Telegraph Avenue toward the Oakland Army Recruiting Center. Owen Chamberlain was among a

- cluster of physics and chemistry faculty and post-docs in this march. The next day the news media, including the prestigious James Reston of the New York Times, dismissed the Berkeley march as only that of a radical fringe of American society. One of our group drafted an eloquent Letter to the Editor of the Times, which the physics and chemistry marchers signed. That letter is reproduced in the photo section of the memorial website for Owen.
3. The third situation I will relate came 25 years ago as a new administration under President Reagan swept into office, giving new energy to the cold war with the Soviet Union, which Reagan called “the Evil Empire.” In its first year in office came threats from Secretary of State Alexander Haig about our possibly firing “nuclear warning shots” to deter potential Soviet aggression in Europe. Our Berkeley FAS chapter and other groups around the country soon received phone calls from the MIT chapter calling for a day of “Teach-ins” about the dangers of any first use of nuclear weapons. Organizing the UC Berkeley teach-in fell mainly to three of us, Owen Chamberlain, Harry Kreisler of the Institute of International Relations here, and myself. We notified most Bay Area news outlets the time and place of the teach-in and invited them to an earlier press conference we called. Only the Oakland Tribune and the Daily Cal sent reporters to the press conference. However, the teach-in drew a huge overflow crowd to Pauley Ballroom, and several major newspapers’ reporters complained to us that they weren’t informed. I think the teach-ins on so many campuses across the country did have some effect. However, the perennial urging of FAS for a “No First Use of Nuclear Weapons” policy by our government has never succeeded to this day.

Yes, Owen, we will miss you, but we will long continue to take inspiration from your moral strength and principles.